

***"Blessed is the person who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God."* Luke 14:15**

Chorus:

**I cannot come to the banquet, don't bother me now.
I have married a wife. I have bought me a cow.
I have fields and commitments that cost a pretty sum.
Pray, hold me excused, I cannot come....**

1. A certain man held a banquet at his fine estate in town.
He laid a festive table and he wore a wedding gown.
He sent invitations to his neighbors far and wide,
But when the meal was ready, each of them replied: I cannot come...(chorus)
2. The master rose up in anger, called his servants by name,
Said: "Go into the town, fetch the blind and the lame,
fetch the peasant and the pauper for this I have willed:
My banquet must be crowded, and my table must be filled." I cannot come...(chorus)
3. When all the poor had assembled, there was still room to spare,
so the master demanded: "Go search everywhere,
to the highways and the byways and tell them to come in,
my table must be filled before the banquet can begin." I cannot come...(chorus)
4. Now God has written a lesson for the rest of mankind:
If we're slow in responding, He may leave us behind.
He's preparing a banquet for that great and glorious day,
when the Lord and Master calls us, be certain not to say: I cannot come...(chorus)

In Jesus' day, parties were celebrations! Think of the movie, "My Big Fat Greek Wedding." Despite modest means, when a daughter was married, the wedding feast would go on for days...and the entire town was invited (many of them were relatives)! Throughout Scripture, the Kingdom of God is portrayed as a Great Banquet in heaven. Hear Isaiah 25:6-9:

On this mountain the LORD Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine - the best of meats and the finest of wines. On this mountain he will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations; he will swallow up death forever. The Sovereign LORD will wipe away the tears from all faces; he will remove the disgrace of his people from all the earth. The LORD has spoken. In that day they will say, "Surely this is our God; we trusted in him, and he saved us. This is the LORD; we trusted in him; let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation."

In his parable, Jesus portrays himself as the servant sent to announce that it is time for God's Great Banquet to begin. Everything that Jesus said and did was a demonstration of God's kingdom coming to earth. Jesus healed the diseases that bring death; Jesus forgave sins that separate; Jesus cast out demons that oppress; Jesus demonstrated life as God intended. But the Master's servant discovered that many of those invited to the party decided not to come... making pitiful excuses. They may sound "legit," but Kenneth Bailey, a Christian theologian who grew up in Beirut, exposes them as "bogus." Bailey says that claiming ***"I have bought a field, and must go out and see it,"*** is a "bold-faced lie...absolutely no one buys a field in the Middle East without knowing every square foot of it like the palm of his hand." The point is that the Generous Host was being "blown off" by rude, ungrateful, self-centered guests.

Jesus came to earth to invite people to God's Great Banquet, but found many would not to come and feast on God's grace. Many Jewish leaders rejected Jesus as Messiah...and like the Generous Host in the parable, the Father and Son were angry - not because they are rejected - but because they want their people to feast. So Heavenly Host does whatever it takes to bring people to the Great Banquet.

I struggle to understand why so many people won't receive Jesus and the Good News of the Kingdom of God. Maybe part of the problem is that many church people lack joy, so Christianity hardly seems like a party...it's just a dreary religion. Looking at the church, many people may wonder...IS there a God?...and IS God really throwing a party? Could it be that many church people are like the Pharisees of Jesus' day...we talk about how much God's Kingdom means to us, but when God invites us...well, there are other things we need to do! Certainly, it is seen with the Sunday morning conflict. But God invites us to feast on his grace in Christ all the time. The Kingdom of God is so much more than going to church...the reign of God happens when people experience healing, forgiveness, reconciliation, growth, and life as a spiritual adventure. Just going to church every now and then isn't living the Kingdom of God...that is like going to a party and not celebrating, because you're making work calls on your cell phone!

Whatever excuses people make are pitiful, compared to the abundant life they miss. Yet the Generous Host is relentless; determined to have a party. In the parable, he commands his servant to ***"Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame."***(14:21) Since the "beautiful people" or "chosen people" wouldn't show, the Host invites people who were humble enough to say "yes" to a generous invitation! And when the servant reported that there was still room, the master said, ***"Go out to the roads and country roads and make people come in, so that my house will be full."*** (14:23) "Make them" does not mean "force them" rather it means "persuade them." Some people turn down God's offer because they don't feel like they belong at such a celebration, they don't feel worthy, or they feel like they would have to "spring" for a gift. It's truly an offer of amazing grace...and God continues to reach us with his generous and gracious invitation.

Friends, **"When the Lord and Master calls YOU, be certain not to say: I cannot come..."**

As we reflect on our response to God's invitation, we remember two women in our congregation who said "Yes" to Jesus and recently entered into His very presence. **Dorothy Arnett** lived life with a twinkle in her eye. She loved Jesus, her family (Robert and Lucy are here), life, and truly everyone. **Lanora Ewert** (known as "Cuddy") was matriarch to 4 generations of the Kuest family here at HPC with Lanora & Bob, Fred & Janá, and Garrett. Both of these women were like family to me - and I know they were to many of you. The joy of God's Forever Family is that they remain family and that we will be with them again at The Great Banquet in heaven Christ invites us to.